

2013 Idaho Winery to Watch: Vale Wine Company

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CALDWELL, IDAHO — John Danielson seemed to be enjoying semi-retirement after a successful climb up the corporate ladder of Albertsons, the supermarket chain and one of Idaho's most storied companies.

Then, a group of wine lovers, one from his home state of Idaho and three others scattered across the country, made him an offer he couldn't pass up.

"They had put together a solid business plan and wanted to know if I wanted to run the thing," Danielson said. "I was like, 'OK guys, you realize the only wine I've ever made was in my garage?' Fortunately, they also gave me the opportunity to get an education on winemaking."

Danielson, 59, has learned well, with Vale Wine Co. earning the title as Wine Press Northwest's 2013 Idaho Winery to Watch.

Last fall, Vale received a silver medal for its 2009 Merlot, 2009 Rendezvous Red blend and 2011 Viognier at the Idaho Wine Competition. And his 2009 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$22) may be the best wine he's made to date, having earned an "Outstanding!" from Wine Press Northwest.

"Our core goal is to produce wines that are enjoyable to drink and are consistent across the portfolio. We feel good about that," said Danielson, who credits much of that success to his grapes from vineyards such as Arena Valley, Skyline and Williamson.

Vale began in 2008 by producing 600 cases, slowly growing to 2,000 from the 2012 vintage, which is being hailed as perhaps the best in the Snake River Valley.

"It turns out that we started up a winery right at the beginning of the worst recession in years," Danielson said.

It would have been a two-year wait to get into Washington State University's distance winemaking program, so Danielson took classes from University of California-Davis. The potential to make award-winning wine from Snake River Valley fruit inspired Danielson's friends in Arizona, Connecticut and Minnesota to create Vale. They chose the geographic term for a broad river valley as the name for their new project.

"These guys are passionate about wine and felt like Idaho was the frontier," Danielson said. "They believe it's going to be the next big thing in wine — the next Washington, if you would."

Vale Wine Co. began in the Boise bedroom community of Garden City, co-oping space with Cinder and Syringa wineries. In 2010, Danielson moved to the University of Idaho's Food and Wine Technology Center in Caldwell. He shares space and equipment with two start-ups — Cellar 616 and Hat Ranch.

“It works well for everybody, and it seems like we take turns talking each down before someone jumps off the ledge,” Danielson laughed. “The joy of this is the winemaking, but sometimes you do want to tear your hair out.”

There is no tasting room provided, so Vale relies on its wine club, grocery stores and wine shop accounts that Danielson services. And it's the business side that comes more easily to him. As a graduate of what is now the College of Idaho, he worked his way from Albertsons freight room to checker and ultimately treasurer by the time he retired in 1998. He moved into consulting while his wife, Vicki, continued to teach grade school. She's since added winery bookkeeping and hose dragging to her résumé.

“I graduated with a business degree, but I had enough of a science background to be dangerous,” he said. And his upbringing in the small farming town of Cambridge, Idaho, helps explain his career path.

“I grew up in a mom-and-pop grocery store and in a food family,” Danielson said fondly. “Both my mom's and dad's families were all great cooks and enjoyed food and wine. That's what you did when you got together. I love to cook.”

He also tapped into his farming roots by developing an estate vineyard on 5 acres near the town of Vale, on the Oregon side of the Snake River Valley. Two vintages of Riesling made it into bottle, but the red varieties did not show promise.

“I finally had to cry ‘Uncle’ on that,” Danielson said. “It was 50 miles from our house. We had a tiny place in Vale that we'd stay at and try to go there to work on the vineyard for two or three days at a time and come back. But it seemed the minute we'd get there and get filthy, someone would call and need us to take them wine.”

Vale Wine Company

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